

“EMERSON AND THAT WHOLE CROWD”

The Sermon at the First Parish in Wayland, Mass.
by the Rev. Ken Sawyer
on April 15, 2007

Transcendentalism is being noticed again these days. Not as much as Anna Nichol Simpson's daughter, Don Imus, or Sunjaya Malakar, but a new book did come out last fall about Ralph Waldo Emerson and that whole crowd called *American Bloomsbury*, written by Susan Cheever, a writer already known to many for her earlier books. She is a lively writer, and the book is, as they say, an easy read, and an enjoyable one, one that is selling well enough that many people are being introduced to the cast of characters that made Concord, Mass., such a remarkable place in the decades preceding the American Civil War.

The allusion to Bloomsbury, the group of literary folks who lived in that London neighborhood, is presumably meant to draw attention to the remarkable concentration of talent and accomplishment in one place and one time, although it understates the importance of the Concord crowd. Cheever herself writes, “I remembered F. O. Matthiessen's bold statement that all of American literature had been written between 1850 and 1855. What I hadn't realized is that most of it was written in [a] cluster of three houses [in Concord]....

“At various times, these three houses were home to Ralph Waldo Emerson and his family, Henry David Thoreau, Bronson Alcott and his daughter Louisa May, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Margaret Fuller. Their neighbors were Henry James and his father, Emily Dickenson and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Horace Mann. Their friends were Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Henry Ward Beecher, and Edgar Allen Poe. From their collaborations with themselves and with the Concord landscape came almost every nineteenth-century masterpiece – *Walden*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Little Women*, to name a few – as well as the ideas about men and women, nature, education, marriage, and writing that shape our world today.”

That quotation highlights some of the virtues and problems of Cheever's approach. It is engagingly expansive, the imagery is powerful, and heaven knows, the literary accomplishments of the crowd she mentions were prodigious. And many of them did interact with many of the others she cites.

But the people she mentions as neighbors to the Concord crowd were neighbors only in the sense that they lived in the same state. And after saying that most of American literature was written in those three houses, she mentions four masterpieces, two of which were written elsewhere, *The Scarlet Letter* in Salem and *Moby-Dick* in Pittsfield.

So you have to be cautious about her facts. She even gets her Concord geography wrong on several occasions. But one can still join in her awe that the five people she focuses on – Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau -- were so productive and interesting, and their lives so interconnected.

Speaking of which, the Bloomsbury allusion in the title may be meant to bring to mind not just the concentration of talent and achievement, but also the complicated interrelations of the members of that group, who got involved with each other in various romantic combinations.

Cheever certainly enjoys sharing stories of the ways that her main characters and others became enamored of each other, although the comparison fails when one considers the lengths to which the Bloomsbury crowd took the expression of their ardor. There is no reason to believe that there was so much as an illicit kiss between members of the Concord crowd. But they did have their closenesses and crushes, and Cheever lets us in on them, in a breezy way. Margaret Fuller was glamorous and sexy. “Hawthorne was a rat with women.” She is happy to say that

her book “is not only a story about ideas and their power to form a national identity; it’s about love triangles and the difficulties of raising children, about grief and inspiration and bad advice and passionate friendships, about the ebb and flow of daily life and the New England seasons in a small town.” [6]

So the book offers the same mixed pleasure of being both history and gossip that I credited last year to a book I talked about a year ago, *The Peabody Sisters* by the historian Megan Marshall, although the memoirist Cheever has less to add to our historical knowledge – and makes at least two points worth challenging.

First, though, I will make her major point, which comes in answer to her question, “What was it about this time and place – the mid nineteenth century in a landlocked town west of Boston – that caused this sudden outburst of genius?” Her answer is Ralph Waldo Emerson, his dream and his money. Emerson had grown up without money, following the death of his father, a prominent Boston minister. But he had married into wealth, and when his wife died of tuberculosis after less than a year and a half, he was both devastated and – after he won a lawsuit against his wife’s family – a man of some means, enough to buy a nice house in Concord and to help others afford to move there, too. By the time that money ran out, he was the star of the lecture circuit nationally and could continue his largess.

Cheever writes, “Of the five writers who happened to live ... at one time or another at the crossroads of the Lexington Road and the Cambridge Turnpike, Emerson was the most conservative, his writing the most austere, but his money ... supported them all.... Emerson wrote some wonderful lines, and some true biographical portraits, but it is as the sugar daddy of American literature that he really takes his place in the pantheon of Concord writers.” As I say, Cheever has a breezy style, to put it politely.

But it was more than the money, it was the goal that he used it to try to achieve. As Cheever writes, “Without Emerson’s dream of community ... there would have been no American literary renaissance. There would be no neighborhood where Margaret Fuller flirted with Nathaniel Hawthorne while enchanting his wife and Henry David Thoreau took Louisa May Alcott for woodland walks. There would have been no Thoreau at Walden, and no *Walden*, no *Scarlet Letter*, or *Little Women*. There would have been no expression of the ideas that are still the credo of the environmental movement or the ideas that sparked feminism. Emerson’s essays are small jewels that still gleam for the discerning reader, but his greatest contribution was in his life and the way he brought together, supported, and encouraged the community that became Concord, Massachusetts.” [196]

For those who want a more detailed account of that community, there is *Emerson Among the Eccentrics* by the late Carlos Baker. And a classic of even greater vintage, from 1936, *The Flowering of New England* by Van Wyck Brooks, is every bit as lively in tone and as much fun as *American Bloomsbury*. And there are wonderful recent biographies of any of these folks, including ones on Emerson by Robert Richardson, Gay Wilson Allen, and others.

Why Emerson and his crowd of fellow thinkers and writers come up among us at church on Sunday morning is that these people were the cutting edge of religious liberalism in their day, and their impact on Unitarianism was profound. For the most part they can be grouped together as Transcendentalists. As Cheever describes them, they “were the original hippies – young, smart, and dedicated to the overthrow of the stuffy existing authorities.

“These authorities included the old Calvinism of the Puritans and the practical humanism of New England Unitarianism. Transcendentalism deified nature and dealt in the kind of marvels and wonders that sometimes even transcended things like having enough to eat or making a living. It replaced the literalness of Locke with the moral imperatives of Kant.... Influenced by...Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott and their followers believed in the power of intuition. They thought every man and even some women harbored a divine spark.” Emerson “explained Kant’s belief that “there was a very important class of ideas ... which did not

come by experience, but through which experience was acquired: that these were intuitions of the mind itself; and he designated them Transcendental forms....”

The Transcendentalists were also typically socially progressive, anti-slavery, pro equality for women, and some of them sometimes given to such innovative ideas as mesmerism, phrenology, spiritualism, Swedenborgiaism, group living, temperance, vegetarianism and even more uncommon diets, like a reliance on graham crackers.

They were certainly in the religious avante guard. But Cheever overestimates how much this represented a rejection of Unitarianism. For some Transcendentalists it did, but many others saw themselves as the liberal wing of Unitarianism, very much still a part of the fold. And over time, while Transcendentalism faded as a movement, many Transcendentalist ideas became commonplace within Unitarianism.

Cheever also exaggerates Emerson’s withdrawal from Unitarianism. Emerson had been minister of the Unitarian Second Church of Boston. He came to believe that Jesus never intended communion to be something people did forever. His church disagreed. Describing Emerson’s dilemma, Cheever writes -- in the strangest line in the book -- “Already he was beginning to turn away from the rigid structure of the Christian Trinity....” [34] Needless to say, he had never in his life had anything to do with the Christian Trinity, rigid or otherwise, any more than did any of the church’s membership.

In any case, he and the church parted ways. Scholars often contend that the real reason for the end of that ministry was that Emerson didn’t really like ministry. In the midst of the attempts to find a compromise, he wrote, “I have sometimes thought that in order to be a good minister it was necessary to leave the ministry. The profession is antiquated.” [Allen, 187]

But to Cheever, Emerson was “drummed out of his church....” [162] Well, sort of: they couldn’t see eye to eye on communion, and Emerson decided not to give in and instead sailed off for sight-seeing on Malta. Upon returning from abroad, Emerson did supply preaching in Unitarian churches for years, including here in Wayland, and often in East Lexington. I read that “Scholars now argue that Emerson did not reject his inherited Unitarian faith but, rather, transformed it.” [UU Biographies]

I still think Cheever’s is a tantalizing way of getting introduced to Concord and some its characters back in 1840s and ’50s. But she has one other way of seeing things that one needs to read cautiously, and that concerns how the Concord crowd treated John Brown, the ardent abolitionist who eventually led an unsuccessful raid on the armory at Harpers Ferry, hoping to capture arms to give to enslaved people so they could win their freedom and end slavery. Earlier, he and his sons had engaged in the battle in Kansas, between those supporting and those opposing slavery there, during which five men were dragged from their homes at Pottawatomie Creek and killed, as Cheever describes in a chilling account.

She asks, “How could Thoreau, Emerson, and the Alcotts have become such fervent admirers and supporters of this violent murderer?” Cheever takes the view of Brown as a blood-thirsty madman that has been put forward often before – especially back then both in the South and among Democrats in the North. So she is scathing in her condemnation of the strong support he did get in Concord, as he did in some other religiously liberal circles.

“Perhaps Thoreau and Alcott were still immature boys who had never been able to support themselves, dazzled by Brown’s bravery and brilliance,” she writes. “But even Emerson, the imminently practical father for those feckless boys, went along.” [161] And she suggests that they helped “bring on the catastrophe [of the Civil War] with their ... willful innocence and self-righteousness.” [162]

The latest biography of John Brown, by David Reynolds, published two years ago, titled *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights*, contends that there are misreadings of history on both sides, and have been all along. The Transcendentalists so effectively idealized Brown that Union troops sang “John Brown’s Body” as they marched on; but Reynolds notes that Brown, “despite his remarkable virtues, had violent

excesses, as evidenced by the nighttime slaughter of five proslavery residents he had directed....” [7] And the opposite view, repeated by Cheever, has become commonplace.

Instead of either view, Reynolds thinks that “(a) Brown was not insane; instead he was a deeply religious, flawed, yet ultimately noble reformer; (b) the Pottawatomie affair was indeed a crime, but ... a war crime”; and (c) the raid at Harpers Ferry was not a wild-eyed, erratic scheme doomed to failure....”

Some of you have been part of previous groups here at First Parish that have met with me once a month throughout the church year to read and discuss the work of Thoreau, or Fuller, or Emerson – that one I’ve done more than once, and I thinking I will do it again next church year – and there is a good new anthology -- although now I’m thinking, What if we read Van Wick Brooks together?

The truth of it is, these characters from up the road continue to raise up issues that can challenge and inspire – and frustrate, too, and sometimes annoy – issues about the use of force and where the divine may reside and gender roles and how friends relate and ... so many other parts of the human drama in which we are all players in the ebb and flow of daily life and the New England seasons in a small town, and in the towns around it.

And with whatever reservations one may have, they continue to intrigue and inspire. Cheever recalls Emerson’s hundredth lecture at the Concord Lyceum in 1880, “more than a hundred years since revolution had come to Concord....”

“The intellectual revolution had taken longer, but, paid for by Emerson, and amused by [Louis May Alcott’s father Bronson], it had come as certainly as the glorious days of 1776. It was a revolution that gently toppled God off his throne and replaced him with nature, with the glory of the physical world, and with the best things in the human heart.” [163-4]

Praise be. Amen.